

# Learners' Attributional Beliefs in Success or Failure and Their Performance on the Interchange Objective Placement Test

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**Abstract**—Although attribution theory has been applied in many fields of education as a way of understanding individual differences, it has somewhat been neglected by professionals in ELT to date. This study has thus sought to investigate the role of EFL learners' attributions for success and failure in learning a foreign language and their performance on placement tests. Three instruments, namely, the Interchange Objective Placement Test (Lesley, Hansen, & Zukowski-Faust, 2005), the Revised Causal Dimension Scale, and the Language Achievement Attribution Scale were administered to 96 Iranian Intermediate EFL learners studying at English language institutes. Attributional properties and causal attributions were compared with learners' English language proficiency scores. Pearson product-moment correlation was applied to the data in order to see if there was any significant relationship between learners' attributions of success and failure and their English language proficiency. The results showed significant correlations between LAAS as well as CDS-II subscales and learners' proficiency scores. Results from Regression Analysis for causal attributions and proficiency scores indicated that effort attribution was the best predictor of high scores, but task difficulty attribution was the best predictor of low scores, in proficiency. Moreover, results from Regression Analysis for attributional properties and proficiency scores indicated that internal locus positively, but external control negatively, predicted students' foreign language proficiency. At the end, what the results of the study may tell us about language teaching and learning is considered.

**Index Terms**—Interchange Objective Placement Test, English proficiency, attribution factors, attribution dimensions

## I. INTRODUCTION

Prediction of academic behavior has become the focus of contemporary psychological research. A large number of theories are formulated, and empirical studies are conducted with respect to each. Among these, attribution theory has set the scene for a plethora of studies in different areas of education.

Initiated by Heider (1958) some fifty years ago, and later expanded by Rotter (1966), attribution theory explains how individuals perceive the causes of their own behavior. The theory was further developed in the works of Weiner (1985; 1986; 1992) who clearly stipulated people's different beliefs about why particular events have occurred in their lives. According to Williams and Burden (1997), attribution theory lies within the constructivist framework and deals with the ways through which individuals shape their own views about the world around them. They proposed attribution theory as an area that could be explored to reach a better understanding of individuals. As a case in point, the attributions people make are likely to influence their subsequent performance (Weiner, 1992), or in Jarvis's (2005) words, they can influence people's motivation to tackle future tasks. For example, if individuals believe that their success is due to their own effort, they will expect to achieve the same outcomes the next time they approach the same or similar tasks. On the other hand, if they ascribe their failure to lack of ability, they will probably avoid approaching those tasks in order to avoid failing again.

Weiner's model of attribution (Weiner, 1979, 1985, 1986) is more complete than other attributional frameworks (Graham, 1991). Accordingly, many researchers in the field of educational psychology (e.g., Bempechat, Ginsburg, Nakkula, & Wu, 1996; Boruchovitch, 2004; Lei, 2009; Meyer & Koelbl, 1982; Ong, 2006) have utilized the model as a frame of reference.

According to Dornyei (2001), attribution theory can also be studied in relation to language learning because, in the first place, failure is a common experience among language learners and, as a result, how individuals perceive their failures has a very strong impact on their future performance; secondly, language aptitude is a familiar term for many people which makes it easy for them to come up with negative perceptions such as 'I don't have a knack for language

learning'. However, there could not be found a consensus in the literature concerning the effect of causal attributions in ESL/EFL learning (e.g., Hsieh, 2004; Hsieh & Schallert, 2008; Kun & Liming, 2007; Lei & Qin, 2009; Pishghadam & Zabihi, 2011). Therefore, the present study has tried to introduce an application of Weiner's theory of attribution to the foreign language learning context of Iran.

## II. RATIONALE AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### A. *Perceived Attributions in Mainstream Psychology*

Ability, effort, luck, and task difficulty are four attributional factors to which people ascribe their successes and failures (Weiner, 1985, 1986). Many researchers have dealt with these factors in their studies (e.g., Bruning, Schraw, & Ronning, 1999; Dornyei & Murphey, 2003; Hsieh & Schallert, 2008).

Weiner (2006) adds to these causal attributions three properties of locus, stability, and control. Locus, firstly introduced by Rotter (1966), is concerned with whether the causes of events are perceived as internal or external by individuals. For example, while luck and task difficulty are external attributions, ability and effort are internal factors. The stability dimension refers to the extent to which the cause of an event is fixed and stable, or unstable, over time. Ability, for instance, is regarded as stable; effort, on the other hand, is considered to be an unstable dimension. Finally, control examines how much control an individual has over a cause. In the case of the four attribution dimensions proposed by Weiner (1986), effort is controllable and the other three properties, i.e. ability, task difficulty, and luck are uncontrollable. Multiple comparisons of causal factors and properties are summarized in Table 1 adapted from Vispoel and Austin (1995), based on Weiner (1979).

TABLE 1.  
DIMENSIONAL CLASSIFICATION SCHEME FOR CAUSAL ATTRIBUTIONS

Attributional factors	Dimensions		
	Locus	Stability	Controllability
Ability	Internal	Stable	Uncontrollable
Effort	Internal	Unstable	Controllable
Task difficulty	External	Stable	Uncontrollable
Luck	External	Unstable	Uncontrollable

### B. *Perceived Attributions in Education*

In the area of education, most of the studies have considered the nexus between attributions and students' performance on tests (Basturk & Yavuz, 2010; Bempechat, Ginsburg, Nakkula, & Wu, 1996; Boruchovitch, 2004; Lei, 2009; Meyer & Koelbl, 1982; Marsh, 1984; Ong, 2006; Powers, Choroszy, Douglas, & Cool, 1986) some of which are briefly explained below.

Bempechat, et al. (1996), for instance, examined the effect of attributions on mathematics achievement. They found out that ability attributions were significantly related to high achievement scores. On the same line, Boruchovitch (2004) conducted a study among low socio-economic Brazilian students with the aim of exploring the role of attributional perceptions of success and failure in their math scores. Having interviewed the students, the researchers indicated internal attributions as the most important variable which made the difference between success and failure. In another study, Ong (2006) examined the relationship between causal attributions and Malaysian and Chinese engineering students' achievement grades, making use of the Revised Causal Dimension Scale (CDS-II). Surprisingly, negative relationships were found between internal locus of causality, personal control, and students' GPA.

### C. *Perceived Attributions in Second and Foreign Language Contexts*

As mentioned before, attribution theory can be studied in relation to language learning (Dornyei, 2001). In the area of ESL/EFL learning, attribution theory has been dealt with by many researchers (e.g., Gao, 2008; Gray, 2005; Gobel & Mori, 2007; Mori, Gobel, Thepsiri, & Pojanapunya, 2010; Peacock, 2010; Pishghadam & Modarresi, 2008; Pishghadam & Zabihi, 2011; Taskiran, 2010; Tsi, 2000; Williams & Burden, 1997; Williams, Burden, & Al-Baharna, 2001; Williams, Burden, Poulet, & Maun, 2004; Yazdanpanah, Sahragard, & Rahimi, 2010). However, most of these studies have simply tried to stipulate ESL/EFL learners' attributions, and only a few of them which are discussed below have attended to the effect of perceived attributions on learners' language learning outcomes.

It was not until very recently that researchers attempted to design a scale for specifically measuring foreign language learners' attributions (Hsieh, 2004; Pishghadam & Modarresi, 2008). Hsieh (2004) devised a self-report questionnaire, namely the Language Achievement Attribution Scale (LAAS), to measure foreign language causal attributions for success and failure which ask learners to rate the extent to which they believed the result of their test was due to their ability, effort, luck, task difficulty, mood, and teacher. In an attempt to examine the role of EFL learners' attribution perceptions in their foreign language achievement, Hsieh (2004) found out that learners who tend to make more internal, personal, and stable attributions received higher achievement grades in English language classes than those who made more external, unstable, and non-personal attributions. Moreover, Hsieh and Schallert (2008) explored the role of foreign language attributions in EFL learners' achievement. The results of their study showed that ability attributions were strongly predictive of foreign language achievement on the part of learners. In a similar study conducted by Lei

and Qin (2009), significant relationships were found between learners' teacher and effort attributions and their English language achievement. Likewise, Peacock (2010) has found significant relationships between attributions and EFL proficiency. In their attempts to examine the relationship between locus of control (LOC) and academic achievement among Iranian EFL learners, Yazdanpanah, et al. (2010) concluded that locus of control was significantly related to, and predictive of, students' academic achievement. Kun and Liming (2007) also studied the effect of learners' attributions on their self-regulated language learning behaviors. They concluded that those who attributed success to internal factors, such as ability or effort, demonstrated more self-regulated language learning behaviors. Gobel and Mori (2007) conducted a research with the aim of constructing a questionnaire of attributions and also examining the relationship between EFL language learning and attributional beliefs among two hundred and thirty-three EFL students in Japan. The results of their study highlighted significant relationships between ability, task difficulty, and exam scores in oral communication and reading classes. In a recent study, Pishghadam and Zabihi (2011) explored the relationship between foreign language attributions and English language achievement among two hundred and nine EFL learners studying at private language institutes in Mashhad. The results of their study indicated that Effort, Personal, and Stable attributions were positively, while Luck and Mood attributions were negatively, predictive of English language achievement. On the contrary, in a study done by Cochran, McCallum, and Bell (2010), attributions did not prove well in predicting foreign language learning.

In their attempts to design a scale for specific use on EFL learners, Pishghadam and Modarresi (2008) used Weiner's (1986) model of achievement attribution to develop and validate a questionnaire of foreign language attributions encompassing four subsections, namely Emotions, Self-image, Intrinsic motivation, and Language policy. In another part of their study, Pishghadam and Modarresi (2008) applied their newly devised questionnaire to university students. They found out that learners were more likely to attribute success or failure to intrinsic motivation and language policy.

### III. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

SLA research has mainly been concerned with stipulating ESL/EFL learners' attributions (e.g., Pishghadam & Modarresi, 2008; Tsi, 2000; Williams & Burden, 1997; Williams, Burden, & Al-Baharna, 2001; Williams, Burden, Poulet, & Maun, 2004). Due to the importance of perceived attributions in language learning (Dornyei, 2001), and in order to satisfy the need for further investigation, the researchers set out to test the role of learners' attributions in their performance on the Interchange Objective Placement Test. The study is an attempt to address some of the issues inherent in previous research and also to fill the gap in the literature by providing additional empirical evidence for the relationship between causal attributions and English language learning. Therefore, this research is conducted to find out answers to the following question:

Q1: Do the attributional beliefs of Intermediate EFL learners about success or failure affect their performance on placement tests?

### IV. METHOD

#### A. Participants

Ninety-six female Intermediate EFL learners from a variety of academic backgrounds took part in the study. They were selected from five private language institutes in Mashhad, a city in north-eastern Iran (The Iran Language Institute, Jihad-e daneshgahi Institute, Khalaghan-e-Javan Institute, Kish Language Institute, and Ferdowsi Language Institute). These institutes were selected because they were among the most creditable private language institutes in Mashhad. Having assured learners of the confidentiality of the results, the researchers selected the subjects based on their agreement to take part in the study. The participants ranged in age from 15 to 38 years old (mean = 19.51, standard deviation = 4.88), and varied in their English language learning experience from 18 months to 7 years.

#### B. Instruments

Three instruments were used in the present study: The first instrument, the Revised Causal Dimension Scale (CDS-II), was developed by McAuley, Duncan, and Russell (1992) in order to measure causal attributions for performance. It encompasses 12 items which measure four attribution properties, i.e. locus of causality, stability, personal control, and external control. The items in the questionnaire are scored on a 9-points Likert scale. Scores for each subsection varies from 3 to 27, with higher values representing attributions that are more internal, stable, personally controllable, and externally controllable. McAuley, Duncan, and Russell (1992) report the reliability estimates for the four subscales based on the results from four independent studies: Locus of causality,  $r = .60$  to  $.71$ ; stability,  $r = .65$  to  $.68$ ; external control,  $r = .71$  to  $.91$ ; personal control,  $r = .71$  to  $.90$ . Cronbach Alpha estimated the reliability of the whole items in this study as  $.68$ .

The second instrument used in the study was a self-report questionnaire designed by Hsieh (2004) to measure foreign language causal attributions for success and failure. It comprises 8 questions that are scored on a 6-point Lickert scale. Firstly, the students are asked their score on the last English language test they had taken and how satisfied they are with the result. Students are then asked to rate the degree to which they believe the result of their test is due to their ability, effort, task difficulty, mood, luck, and teacher. In the present study the reliability of LAAS estimated by

Cronbach Alpha was .60. The relatively low reliability of the scale is acceptable because it comprises only 6 items, each measuring a different attribution; in other words, the length of the questionnaire has affected its reliability coefficient.

Finally, the Interchange Objective Placement Test was employed in the present study to measure learners' proficiency scores in a placement situation. It was designed by Lesley, Hansen, and Zukowski-Faust (2005), and comprises 70 multiple-choice items primarily measuring the three skills, i.e. listening comprehension, reading comprehension, and language use. The number of each section in the Objective Test is as follows: listening (20 items), reading (20 items), and language use (30 items). The administration of and answering the Objective Test requires 50 minutes. The Listening items assess learners' ability to understand main idea, context, and supporting details in a conversation, as well as the speaker's intent. The Reading questions, likewise, measure learners' ability to understand main and supporting ideas in written passages, vocabulary, and also the author's intent. Moreover, the Language Use section investigates learners' ability in recognizing contextually appropriate and grammatically correct statements. As Lesley, Hansen, and Zukowski-Faust (2005, p. 5) have pointed out, "the different components of the test may be administered to individuals or to groups, and in any order". In the present study, the researchers have utilized the total Objective Placement Test containing three subcomponents of proficiency, i.e. listening comprehension, reading comprehension, and language use.

### C. Procedures

The above-mentioned instruments were administered to 96 EFL learners studying at English language institutes. In order to receive reliable measures of attributional factors and dimensions as well as English proficiency on the part of the learners, they were asked not to mention their names on the questionnaires. Rather, the questionnaires were coded numerically.

The data gathered from the two questionnaires were analyzed by utilizing the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 16.0. Firstly, to explore the relationship between the learners' foreign language attributions and their English language proficiency scores, Pearson product-moment correlation was employed. Next, the researchers ran the regression analysis to find out the extent to which foreign language attributions might have predictive power in learners' English proficiency.

## V. RESULTS

### A. Correlations between Learners' Attributions and Their Proficiency Scores

To examine whether there is any significant correlation between the learners' attributions and English proficiency, Pearson product-moment correlation was employed. The results revealed that there is a significant correlation between English language proficiency and effort attributions ( $r = 0.553$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), ability attributions ( $r = 0.404$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), task difficulty attributions ( $r = -0.354$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), and teacher attributions ( $r = -0.298$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Moreover, significant correlations were found between proficiency and internal locus of causality ( $r = 0.397$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), external control ( $r = -0.274$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), stability ( $r = 0.221$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), and personal control ( $r = 0.297$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) (see Table 2).

TABLE 2.  
CORRELATIONS BETWEEN LEARNERS' ATTRIBUTIONS AND ENGLISH PROFICIENCY

	<b>Proficiency</b>
Ability	0.404**
Effort	0.553**
Task Difficulty	-0.354**
Mood	0.015
Luck	-0.102
Teacher	-0.298**
Internal locus of causality	0.397**
External control	-0.274**
Stability	0.221*
Personal Control	0.297**

\*\* Shows the existence of significant relationship at the level of 0.01

\* Shows the existence of significant relationship at the level of 0.05

### B. Results of Regression Analysis for Causal Attributions and Learners' Proficiency

To further analyze the data, the researchers conducted the regression analysis. A stepwise multiple regression consisting of LAAS factors 2 (effort) and 3 (task difficulty) successfully predicted total proficiency test scores ( $R = .61$ ). Put it another way, English proficiency explained 36% of the total variance, (Adjusted  $R^2 = 0.36$ ,  $p < .05$ ) using a combination of effort attribution and task difficulty attribution. Effort attribution was the best predictor for achievement (Adjusted  $R^2 = 0.28$ ,  $p < .05$ ), indicating that students who attributed the outcome of their test to effort received higher grades on the placement test. However, task difficulty attribution was the best predictor of lower grades on the placement test. Table 3 presents the results for English proficiency having been regressed on the variables of interest in this study, i.e. causal attributions.

TABLE 3.  
THE RESULTS OF REGRESSION ANALYSIS FOR LEARNERS' ATTRIBUTIONS (LAAS) AND THEIR ENGLISH PROFICIENCY

Predictors	R	R <sup>2</sup>	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	F	P	B
English proficiency						
Effort	0.545	0.297	0.289	36.762	0.00	0.517
Task difficulty	0.619	0.384	0.369	26.761	0.00	-0.296

### C. Results of Regression Analysis for Attributional Properties and Learners' Proficiency

Table 4 presents the results for English proficiency having been regressed on the variables of interest in this study, i.e. attribution dimensions. The results reveal which variables are important in predicting English proficiency. English proficiency explained 23% of the total variance, (Adjusted R<sup>2</sup> = 0.23,  $p < .05$ ) using a combination of internal locus and external control. Attributing success and failure to internal factors was the best predictor for achievement (Adjusted R<sup>2</sup> = 0.13,  $p < .05$ ), indicating that students who attributed the outcome of their test to internal factors received higher grades on the Interchange Objective Placement Test.

TABLE 4.  
THE RESULTS OF REGRESSION ANALYSIS FOR LEARNERS' ATTRIBUTIONS (CDS-II) AND THEIR ENGLISH PROFICIENCY

Predictors	R	R <sup>2</sup>	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	F	P	B
English proficiency						
Internal locus of causality	0.384	0.147	0.138	15.552	0.00	0.397
External control	0.504	0.254	0.237	15.160	0.00	-0.327

## VI. DISCUSSION

This study has tried to fill the gap in attribution research by providing more empirical support for Weiner's attribution theory, approaching the theory from a foreign language teaching perspective in a new context. With that in mind, the researchers adopted a 'dimensions + reasons' approach to investigate the role of learners' foreign language attributions in their proficiency scores as measured by the Interchange Objective Placement Test.

The Pearson product-moment correlation applied to the data showed that among six attribution factors (i.e. ability, effort, task difficulty, mood, luck, and teacher), as well as four attribution dimensions (internal locus of causality, personal control, external control, and stability), eight attributions had significant relationships with the learners' scores on the Interchange Objective Placement Test. This finding can be explained in the light of other similar studies (Hsieh, 2004; Hsieh & Schallert, 2008; Lei & Qin, 2009; Pishghadam & Zabihi, 2011). However, in order to see which variables might predict the learners' performance, the researchers ran the regression analysis the results of which are discussed below.

As far as causal dimensions (CDS-II) are concerned, the results of the present study indicated that internal locus of causality has a significant positive effect on EFL learners' scores on the placement test; on the other hand, the results showed that external control attributions were associated with low scores on the Objective Test. In sum, a combination of internal locus and external control explained 23% of the variances in test scores (Adjusted R<sup>2</sup> = 0.23,  $p < .05$ ). English teachers are therefore recommended to help learners find the causes of success or failure in learning the English language within themselves, and also avoid attributing their successes and failures to external factors, such as luck or task difficulty, over which they have little or no control.

Having entered attribution factors (LAAS) into the regression analysis, the researchers found out that a combination of effort and task difficulty attributions significantly predicted learners' scores on the test. This finding is in line with that obtained by Lei and Qin (2009) and Pishghadam and Zabihi (2011). Because effort attribution was found in the present study to be positively correlated with ( $r = 0.553$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and strongly predictive of (Adjusted R<sup>2</sup> = 0.28,  $p < .05$ ) English proficiency scores, it is important for English teachers to recognize the crucial role that attributing success and failure to effort on the part of learners plays in their English language learning. If teachers remind learners that their foreign language learning failure is due to their insufficient effort, rather than because of other external sources, learners may realize that they did not actually make sufficient effort on the task and, as a result, it makes them make up for their failure the next time they are faced with a similar task.

But the important question is: Can we ever change learners' attributions? Fortunately, although learners' attributions of success or failure are shaped over a long time and it is difficult to change them (Hong, 2008), they are changeable (Williams & Burden, 1997) and teachers can intervene to modify or change learners' attributional perceptions. As Perry, Hechter, Menec, and Weinberg (1993) observed, teachers' attempts to change learners' perceptions of the cause of failure from lack of ability to lack of effort have proved to be effective in improving their college grades.

Therefore, as Lei and Qin (2009, p. 46) point out, "effort is very important in learning, without which learners could achieve nothing." The learner who attributes failure to lack of effort, i.e. to their own actions and characteristics, feels more responsible for their actions; teachers, thus, should remind learners of the value of effort. According to Hsieh (2004, p. 143), "when learners feel that they are responsible for the outcome of their grades, they tend to become more involved and active in the learning process."

Also, ability attributions were significantly correlated with learners' scores ( $r = 0.404$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). This finding is in line with that obtained in Hsieh (2004) who concluded that ability attributions had the strongest correlation with learners' language achievement, and Hsieh and Schallert (2008) whose results indicated that ability attributions were significantly predictive of learners' achievement scores.

On the other hand, attributing success or failure to task difficulty proved to be associated with lower proficiency scores. Therefore, those learners who attribute their failures to task difficulty are recommended to change their attitudes since task difficulty is an external factor beyond the learner's control.

Since, in the present study and other studies, different attributional factors induced different outcomes in learners, a change in learners' attribution patterns would produce a change in learners' scores. Therefore, language teachers are recommended to emphasize the value of learners' effort in learning a foreign language.

However, several studies have showed that a number of individual differences such as culture (Brown, Gray & Ferrara, 2005; Holloway, 1988; Graham, 1991), gender (Bar-Tal & Frieze, 1977; Nelson & Cooper, 1997; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002), self-esteem (Ames & Ames, 1984; Fitch, 1970; Skaalvik, 1994), learning strategies (Soric & Ancic, 2008), teacher feedback (Gao, 2008), and so on may affect the way individuals perceive the causes of their success or failure. Moreover, attribution theory suffers from a weakness, i.e. self-serving bias (Zuckerman, 1979), which refers to individuals' tendency to attribute success to their own ability and effort, while ascribing their failure to external factors such as luck or task difficulty. Therefore, special care should be taken while generalizing the findings of the present study.

In sum, as long as EFL learners look for more internal causes to which they can ascribe their success or failure, instead of perceiving themselves and their performance on English tests as determined by some external, uncontrollable, and unstable factors, they will have greater chances of enhancing their English proficiency.

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